



ENGL 2020-034 (14111)

Themes in Literature and Culture:

Video Games and/as Literature

PH 306 | TR 2:40 – 4:05 p.m. | 3 credits

INSTRUCTOR INFORMATION

Name: Dr. Eric Detweiler

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Office: Peck 323A

Office Phone: 615-898-2585

Student Hours (USE THEM! PLEASE!): 2:30 – 4 p.m. on Mon., 11:00 a.m.– 12:30 p.m. on Thurs., and by appointment (in person or Zoom)

COURSE INFORMATION

Prerequisites and Co-requisites

Completion of ENGL 1010 and either ENGL 1020 or ENGL 1050. Satisfies Creativity and Cultural Expression (Discovery) and literature requirements for True Blue Core.

Description

In recent years, critics, scholars, and players of video games have started approaching video games as an artform that merits serious study. In other words, video games are following in the footsteps of more established media—novels, movies, television—that were once dismissed as trashy entertainment but gave rise to respected works of art. Along the way, video games have started using complex literary and narrative techniques. In some cases, game designers have adapted works of literature like Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* and Douglas Adams' *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*. In others, independent game designers have created games with interactive narratives that explore complicated questions about identity, death, and relationships—questions that have long been explored by other forms of art.

In this course, students will draw on scholarly frameworks from English studies, game studies, and related fields to analyze video games as a narrative form. Students will explore how video games' interactive multimedia narratives shift and affirm our assumptions about what stories can do and how they affect us. Along the way, students will read scholarship about literature and video games, read works of literature alongside video-game adaptations, and play video games that extend and challenge our notions of story-driven art.

Major or Minor in Public Writing and Rhetoric!

Are you interested in a major focused on the kinds of projects you're doing for this course? Consider majoring or minoring in [Public Writing and Rhetoric](#)! This new program is the first of its kind in the state of Tennessee, and it's designed to prepare students to write effectively for a wide variety of audiences in different public and professional contexts. There are PWR courses focused on digital writing, technical writing, writing for community organizations and more, plus lots of opportunities to take writing courses in other areas and disciplines. If you're interested in learning more about the major, let Dr. Detweiler know.

Objectives

In this course, students will

1. improve their ability to read, think, and write critically and analytically about a wide variety of texts;
2. be able to identify basic structural and/or technical elements and strategies and to discuss how those elements contribute to the overall effect of a literary work;
3. gain a greater sense of the range and sorts of texts that are available to them as readers and, hopefully, of the sorts of texts that they most enjoy and wish to continue reading;
4. gain a greater sense of the "conversations" between texts; that is, they will have a sense of the ways in which texts respond to earlier texts, develop ongoing cultural conversations about key issues, develop genres and style, etc.;
5. gain a greater sense of the ways in which texts function within culture(s), of the ways in which texts can be used to understand and gain insight into cultures/historical movements, and of the ways in which cultural context shapes both the production and reading of texts; and
6. develop a sense of themselves as readers; they will gain greater independence in their interpretations and become more aware of their own approaches, assumptions, and interpretive strategies. Conversely, they will become aware of the range of possible reading strategies, encounter and test out new ways of working with texts, and increase their interpretive repertoire.

Topics Covered

This course will address three major topics, each of which will correspond to a major course project.

- The History of Video Games
- Analyzing Video Games
- Arguing with Video Games

COURSE MATERIALS

Required Textbooks

There is no required textbook for this course. All course readings will be available as PDFs or hyperlinks through Canvas.

Supplementary Materials

You will need a college-ruled composition notebook or something similar.

You are required to have access to two video games for this course: (1) [*Celeste*](#) and (2) [*Citizen Sleeper*](#). You are welcome to purchase them on a computer, a console, or any other platform where they're available. If you already own one of them, that's fine.

We will play other games for class, but they will be free browser-based games. I'll provide additional instructions for accessing them as the semester unfolds. If, for reasons of accessibility or disability, it isn't possible for you to play assigned games, I am happy to discuss alternatives.

ASSESSMENT AND GRADING

Grading Procedure

I've tried to make the grading system for the course as straightforward as possible. Your grades on all individual assignments will be pass/fail. That means if you meet a set of basic requirements for an assignment, you'll get full credit for it. If you don't, you'll get no credit. See the tables below for a breakdown of coursework and how it will correspond to different letter grades. It's a little different from how grades work in many courses and may take a minute for you to wrap your head around. But my hope is that, in the end, it will make it simpler for you to succeed in the course and keep the focus on learning instead of hitting specific percentages with each assignment just so you can maintain the GPA you want. I will update the Canvas gradebook regularly, so you'll be able to keep track of the work you've completed there.

I will provide more detailed prompts for all the assignments listed below as the semester unfolds. Most coursework will be submitted via Canvas dropboxes.

Assignment	Percentage of Grade
<i>Day-to-Day Work</i>	
Reading Notes	20%
Gaming Journal	15%
Peer Workshops (3)	15%
<i>Major Writing Projects</i>	
Video Game History (2 drafts)	15%
Narrative Analysis (2 drafts)	15%
Metagame (2 drafts)	20%

Assignment	Percentage of Grade
Total	100%

The grading scale for this course is as follows:

A: 90-100 B+: 87-89 B: 83-86 B-: 80-82	C+: 77-79 C: 73-76 C-: 70-72 D+: 67-69	D: 63-66 D-: 60-62 F: 59 and under
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Incomplete Grades

Incomplete grades are given rarely and only in extenuating circumstances. Page 56 of the [MTSU Undergraduate Catalog](#) states: "The grade I indicates that the student has not completed all course requirements because of illness or other uncontrollable circumstances, especially those which occur toward the end of the term. Mere failure to make up work or turn in required work on time does not provide the basis for the grade of 'I' unless extenuating circumstances noted above are present for reasons acceptable to the instructor." Please refer to the Undergraduate catalog for the complete Incomplete Grade Policy.

Feedback

- I will provide feedback on all your major writing projects via the Canvas dropboxes where you submit those assignments. I will provide feedback no more than two weeks after you submit the assignment. In most cases, you will receive audio recording of my feedback. If there is any reason why audio feedback will not work or be accessible for you, please let me know and I'm happy to find a form of feedback that will.
- I'll provide shorter written feedback on daily work as needed. For instance, if you submit a set of reading notes that doesn't meet the requirements, I'll describe the issue in a comment in the dropbox.
- Assignments must be submitted via Canvas and will not be accepted via email. If you ever have trouble getting a file uploaded to Canvas, please let me know and we can figure out a solution.
- All assignment deadlines will be listed in the calendar in Canvas.

Deadlines and Late Work

I have deadlines in my classes for three main reasons, which I think it's worth taking a moment to explain as a way of helping you understand where I'm coming from as a teacher:

1. Because of my own limitations. If I have every student turning in every assignment at a different time, it gets easy for me to overlook things, which can delay my feedback and cause confusion for you all.
2. Because you all will be learning together. As much as we sometimes think of reading and writing as solitary activities (a lone author sitting in their room typing away at a novel or essay), they are deeply social experiences. We'll discuss this point in this course. But for now, it means you'll be learning in conversation with each other, and

you'll be providing each other feedback on what you're working on. For that to work, you'll need to be working on assignments at roughly the same time as your classmates.

3. Because the assignments in this class build on each other. That means you'll apply things you learn from earlier assignments while you're working on later assignments. If you try to do everything in the last few weeks of the semester, then you won't be able to build on what you've already learned. It would be like trying to climb a ladder by immediately jumping to the highest step—a difficult if not impossible task.

So there will be deadlines in this class, which you'll be able to see using the Canvas calendar. I ask that you stick to those deadlines as much as possible. That said, if something comes up that prevents you from turning something in on time—an illness, a technological issue, a family emergency—please let me know. I am often, though not always, willing to give extensions as needed. I just ask that, if you anticipate needing an extension on a major writing project or other recurring work, you email me **in advance** of the deadline so that I can plan accordingly. If you don't provide me with advance notice, I may not be able to provide you with a way to make up coursework.

Academic Integrity/Misconduct

Please review MTSU's policy on [Academic Integrity and Misconduct](#).

If you're ever concerned that you might be plagiarizing in a project you're working on (by not citing sources correctly, etc.), I encourage you to check in with me. I hope this is obvious, but I won't penalize you for accidentally plagiarizing in an early draft of a project that you share with me. If you submit a plagiarized assignment to one of the Canvas dropboxes, you will have to redo it to get credit for the assignment. Resources on how to cite work correctly are available through the website of the [University Writing Center](#). You can read more about how to avoid plagiarism from the [Office of the University Provost](#).

Plagiarism includes, but is not limited to:

- submitting another person's work (papers, themes, reports, drawings, laboratory notes, computer programs, etc.) as if it's your own;
- submitting AI-generated work as your own;
- knowingly assisting another student in obtaining or using materials they attempt to pass off as their own work (this does *not* include collaborating with each other while you're working on a writing project, which I encourage you to do);
- submitting assignments previously used in other courses where you received credit for the work (in other words, you can plagiarize yourself); and
- improperly crediting or not crediting another author's work.

Ultimately, the consequences for plagiarism are my call. If you repeatedly and intentionally plagiarize assignments in this course, possible disciplinary sanctions (including expulsion from the university) may be imposed through the regular institutional procedures for addressing academic misconduct. I have the option of not giving you credit for plagiarized assignments until they're redone or of giving you an F for the course. Students guilty of plagiarism may be reported to the Vice Provost for Academic Affairs.

Chatbots

As you probably know, large language models (like Google's Gemini) and text-generation tools (like OpenAI's ChatGPT) have become a big deal in the last couple of years. While the models themselves don't think, they are often referred to as "artificial intelligence."

In this course, think it'd be unrealistic and impractical for me to just say, "No AI allowed!" Tech companies are rushing to integrate chatbots into tons of products in hard-to-avoid ways, and they will probably play some role in the writing you do in your future lives.

But there's a problem here: this is a course where you'll be using writing as a form of thinking, not just as a way of restating common knowledge or summarizing information you don't feel like writing up. In other words, in this course, writing **is** learning, not a side effect or reflection of other things you've learned.

With that in mind, here's the AI policy for this course: You may **not** use AI tools to generate material used directly in a course project. For instance, don't ask ChatGPT to write a paragraph on a particular topic and drop it straight into a draft.

You may use AI tools to help you plan and polish your major writing projects (finding sources, doing grammar checks, etc.), but you **must** document and reflect on any AI usage along with your drafts of those projects. So, for instance, if you use ChatGPT to generate a list of potential sources for a first draft of a project, screenshot or copy-and-paste that chat, then submit it with your first draft along with a brief discussion of how you used those sources. If you use an AI tool to help you rework a paragraph in a revised draft, submit what you put into and got back from it along with the final draft along with a brief discussion of what differences you notice between the two drafts. There's no penalty for using AI in these ways as long as you document that use.

On a side note, I want to emphasize that I am not the sort of teacher who looks for ways to fail students or tell them what bad writers they are. I don't deduct points for grammatical mistakes, for instance. The worst kinds of writing classes just expect students to be perfect writers from the start, then label students as "good" or "bad" writers and grade them accordingly. This is not one of those classes. Writing is a messy process, and I expect you to make mistakes and present half-formed ideas and cite sources that aren't a great fit for your project, then do better based on feedback and practice. I know students often plagiarize (with or without AI) because of anxiety and confusion about how their writing will be received. I hope knowing that my goal is to support your development as writers, not to force you to prove that you're already great at writing, will make you more comfortable experimenting with AI without handing off your whole writing process. I want you to learn through writing, not prove you're already an excellent writer.

If I have good reason to suspect a project was entirely or primarily written by AI, I will ask you to rewrite the project before giving credit.

OTHER COURSE POLICIES

Attendance

I ask that you miss no more than four class meetings. If you miss more than four, you **must** schedule a one-on-one meeting with me to develop a plan to make sure you can keep up with the course. If you don't schedule that meeting, you won't be able to pass the course. Each additional absence will require an additional one-on-one meeting.

Email

If you need to get in touch with me outside of office hours, my MTMail address is the best way to do so: eric.detweiler@mtsu.edu. In most cases, I'll reply to emails I receive during the workweek within 24 hours. I don't always check my email on the weekend, so if you have an urgent question and the weekend is approaching, email me by 5 p.m. on Friday.

Per the [Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act \(FERPA\)](#), most communication related to grades will happen inside Canvas. If you ask me a grade-related question via MTMail, I may suggest we continue the conversation via Canvas because it provides a little more privacy. While we're on the topic of FERPA: I cannot and will not communicate with your parents, guardians, or others about your grades or how you're doing in the course. That's because of the privacy protections FERPA grants you as a college student. If there is a parent, guardian, or other person you want to grant access to your grades and other educational records, they will need to register through the [Partners in Education program](#). Once they are enrolled in that program, they can request relevant records through the MT One Stop.

OTHER MTSU RESOURCES AND POLICIES

Students with Disabilities

Middle Tennessee State University is committed to campus access in accordance with Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act and Section 504 of the Vocational Rehabilitation Act of 1973. Any student interested in reasonable accommodations can consult the [Disability & Access Center \(DAC\)](#) website and/or contact the DAC for assistance at 615-898-2783 or [DAC Email](#).

I know that students may encounter accessibility needs and challenges that extend beyond what is officially on file with the DAC. If I can assist with any additional accessibility issues, please don't hesitate to get in touch. I'm happy to help.

University Writing Center

The University Writing Center is a great resource for students. Its physical location is room 362 of the James E. Walker Library, and it's online at www.mtsu.edu/uwc. The UWC offers students valuable one-on-one assistance with their writing, and they offer virtual appointments. You can make an appointment for a conference using their website or by calling (615) 904-8237. Whether you feel like you're the best or the worst writer in the class, the UWC is a wonderful resource.

Title IX

Students who believe they have been harassed, discriminated against or been the victim of sexual assault, dating violence, domestic violence or stalking should contact a Title IX/Deputy Coordinator at 615-898- 2185 or 615-898-2750 for assistance or review [MTSU's Title IX website](#) for resources.

MTSU faculty are concerned about the well-being and development of our students and are legally obligated to share reports of sexual assault, dating violence, domestic violence and stalking with the University's Title IX coordinator to help ensure student's safety and welfare. Please refer to [MTSU's Title IX website](#) or contact information and details.

Grade Appeals

[University Policy 313, Student Grade Appeals](#), provides an avenue for MTSU students to appeal a final course grade in cases in which the student alleges that unethical or unprofessional actions by the instructor and/or grading inequities improperly impacted the final grade.

Hope (Lottery) Scholarship Information

Do you have a lottery scholarship? To retain the Tennessee Education Lottery Scholarship eligibility, you must earn a cumulative TELS GPA of 2.75 after 24 and 48 attempted hours and a cumulative TELS GPA of 3.0 thereafter. A grade of C, D, F, FA, or I in this class may negatively impact TELS eligibility.

If you drop this class, withdraw, or if you stop attending this class you may lose eligibility for your lottery scholarship, and you may not be able to regain eligibility at a later time.

For additional Lottery rules, please refer to your [Lottery Statement of Understanding form](#) or contact your [MT One Stop Enrollment Counselor](#).

Course Calendar

The following schedule lists the deadlines for readings and other course assignments. There are four columns: (1) the date, (2) readings/reading notes due that day, (3) major writing projects due that day, and (4) games we'll be playing in or outside of class. Unless otherwise noted, all readings, notes, and projects are due by the time class starts the day they're listed in the calendar below. In some cases, the "Read" column also includes a quick overview of other things we'll be doing that day.

I will do my best to keep us in line with this schedule throughout the semester. However, I reserve the right to make changes as needed (in the event of things like inclement weather, personal emergencies, etc.). If I ever do make changes to this calendar, I will announce them in class and via a news item on Canvas. If you ever see any discrepancies between this calendar and a deadline listed somewhere else in Canvas, please let me know and I'll address it ASAP.

All readings can be found in Canvas as PDFs or links.

<i>Date</i>	<i>Read</i>	<i>Write</i>	<i>Play</i>
Week 1			
Jan. 20	Syllabus and Course Calendar (read and discuss in class)		
Jan. 22	In class, we'll read and discuss the prompts for Reading Notes and the Gaming Journal assignment.		
Week 2			
Jan. 27	Reading: • <i>Understanding Video Games</i>, Chapter 1: "Studying Video Games"		Start playing <i>Secret of Monkey Island</i> as soon as you'd like. Beat it or put in 5 hours by Feb. 26.
Jan. 29	In class, we'll read and discuss the prompt for the Video Game History prompt. Reading: • First part of <i>Understanding Video Games</i>, Chapter 4: "History" (pages 61 – 93)		In-class playthrough: <i>Atari 50</i>
Week 3			
Feb. 3	Reading:		

	Second part of <i>Understanding Video Games</i>, Chapter 4: "History" (pages 93 – 119)		
Feb. 5	Readings: - Carly Kocurek, <i>Save Point</i> - Jennifer deWinter, "Miyamoto/Kojima: Authorship"		
Week 4			
Feb. 10	Readings: - Nick Montfort, "Adventure and Its Ancestors" - Sarah Laskow, "Welcome to Interactive Fiction: You're a Wizard-Sniffing Pig"		By the start of Wednesday's class, play about 30 min. of Colossal Cave Adventure (scroll down to the "Play Adventure in Browser" section). In-class playthrough of Zork I.
Feb. 12	Readings: - Rachel Adler, "The 19th Century Moral Panic Over ... Paper Technology" - Carly Kocurek, "Night Trap: Moral Panic"		In-class playthrough: Maniac Mansion
Week 5			
Feb. 17	In class: introduction to Twine. We'll also read and discuss the instructions for upcoming peer workshops. Reading (no notes required): Adam Hammond, "A Total Beginner's Guide to Twine 2.1"		
Feb. 19	Instead of standard class meeting, individual conferences about Video Game History project.		
Week 6			
Feb. 24	Readings: Celia Pearce, "Game Noir: A Conversation with Tim Schafer"		
Feb. 26	Watch the following sections of the documentary <i>Double Fine Adventure!</i>		By the start of this class

	and take notes on them before class (in this case, take about a line of notes per minute of video): • "A Perfect Storm for Adventure" • "A Promise of Infinite Possibility"		meeting, beat or put 5 hours into <i>Secret of Monkey Island</i>. If you haven't already, begin playing <i>Celeste</i>. Beat by Apr. 7. As we'll discuss in class, don't hesitate to use assist mode as needed!
Week 7			
Mar. 3	In class, you'll read and respond to classmates' drafts for our first peer workshop.	Video Game History (First Draft)	
Mar. 5	In class, we'll read and discuss the prompts for the Narrative Analysis and Metagame projects. Reading: • Ian Bogost, "Art"	Gaming Journal (Midterm Check)	
MAR. 9 – 13: SPRING BREAK			
Week 8			
Mar. 17	Readings: • Joanna Wolfe and Laura Wilder, excerpt from <i>Digging Into Literature</i> • Amber Sparks, "Take Your Daughter to the Slaughter"		
Mar. 19	Reading: • N. K. Jemisin, "On the Banks of the River Lex"	Video Game History (Revised Draft) due by 11:59 p.m. on Friday	
Week 9			
Mar. 24	Instead of full-class meeting, one-on-one midterm conferences about Video		

	Game History and Narrative Analysis projects.		
Mar. 26	Reading: <i>Understanding Video Games</i>, Chapter 7: "Narrative"		
Week 10			
Mar. 31	Readings: - Anastasia Salter, "<i>King's Quest: Narrative</i>" - Mark J. P. Wolf, "<i>BioShock Infinite: World-Building</i>"		
Apr. 2	Reading: <i>Understanding Video Games</i>, Chapter 5: "Video Game Aesthetics"		
Week 11			
Apr. 7	In-class viewing of Game Score Fanfare's "The Anxiety of Celeste and its Music" . Reading: Dan Golding, "<i>The Legend of Zelda: The Ocarina of Time: Music</i>"		By the beginning of class, beat <i>Celeste</i> . If you haven't already started, begin <i>Citizen Sleeper</i> . Complete by Apr. 23.
Apr. 9	In class, you'll read and respond to classmates' drafts for our second peer workshop.	Narrative Analysis (First Draft)	
Week 12			
Apr. 14	Reading: - Anna Anthropy, "By Your Bootstraps" - Anna Anthropy and Naomi Clark, selections from <i>A Game Design Vocabulary</i>		Twine Games from Past ENGL 2020 Students (by Wednesday's class, put in an hour or so playing and/or looking at the back ends of these games): SpaceEdge Hero 811

			<i>Missing: Have You Seen This Chicken?</i>
Apr. 16	Reading: Michaela Joffe and Pippin Barr, "Eft to Newt"		
Week 13			
Apr. 21	No readings. Work on Metagame in class.	Narrative Analysis (Revised Draft)	
Apr. 23	No readings. Discuss <i>Citizen Sleeper</i> in class.		Complete <i>Citizen Sleeper</i> by the start of class.
Week 14			
Apr. 28		Metagame (First Draft) Gaming Journal (Final Check)	In class, you'll play classmates' games for our final peer workshop.
Finals			
May 5	During final exam period (3:30 – 5:30 p.m.), play each other's games!	Metagame (Middle Draft) due by 3:30 on Tues., May 5 Metagame (Final Draft) due by 11:59 p.m. on Thurs., May 7	